

## **Effects of different cultural background among students studying in an English medical program in Poznan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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**Introduction:** Study abroad offers many benefits as well as challenges; the biggest challenge is cultural shock.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of cultural orientation and its effects on the stages/phases of Cultural Shock among a widely diverse group of Medical students (Graduating Class of 2011) of Poznan University of Medical Sciences (PUMS).

**Material and methods:** Medical students, who matriculated to PUMS four-year Doctor of Medicine English Program in 2007, were interviewed or were asked to complete a survey, by answering questions such as giving a chronological account of their entire experience during their four years of study in Poznan. These participants represented nationalities and orientations including; Native Americans, Polish-born Americans, Puerto Rican, Iran-born Swedish, Nigerian-American, Ghanaian-born Americans, Taiwanese, Hong Kong-born Canadian, as well as British-born Iraqi. The outcome of the study generally confirmed my hypotheses that; though we were all exposed to the

Polish culture at the same time during our four years of studies in Poznan, each individual had a somewhat different view or perceived their experiences differently. These differences were in part due to the diverse orientation and background of each student, prior to matriculation to the Doctor of Medicine program at the PUMS. The study showed that, each student's perception varied immensely based on their responses to questions posed.

**Conclusions:** This study evidently showed that the various stages/phases of cultural shock were experienced in no specific order, duration or the magnitude of expression. Participants reported different views or perceptions of the same Polish culture. These differences could be attributed to their cultural orientation and/or previous experience, which played a significant role in how, when, or whether or not they even experience any of the different stages/phases of cultural shock.

**Key words:** medical student, experience, cultural shock, Poznan

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The drive of achieving my lifelong dream of becoming a physician overcame my fear and horror of being separated from my family (wife and three daughters) to pursue my medical career in a foreign country I knew completely nothing about, besides the reputation of the medical program at PUMS. As a non-traditional student, deciding to go back to school alone was extremely challenging, even if I didn't have to study abroad.

This was a decision that not only affected my life, but, also that of my spouse as well as my three amazing daughters. I had to consider and draw a plan to make sure my children and other essential obligations will be attended to while I was pursuing my career in Medicine. My decision to leave my family was one of the most difficult decisions I ever had to make. This difficult decision has turned out to be one of the best decisions I have ever made.

In addition to obtaining my Medical degree, I had the privilege to acquire enormously priceless experiences that would have taken a lifetime of traveling to have been exposed to such experience. This was definitely a decision that tested the limits of my endurance, intelligence, finances, and courage, not to mention my pride; a decision that I will repeat (even made sooner) if I had to go back into time.

Poznan is a city full of students from many different backgrounds and nationalities. This diversified environment, in addition to the natives of the city, brings with it exposure to different amazing personalities within the city. People from different cultures perceive things differently, depending of their respective "norms" and cultural background prior to coming to this new environment.

In this article, I will share my experiences as well as those of some of my colleagues, during our four years of living and studying in Poznan. I will attempt to explore how our various cultural orientations affected how we each dealt with the different stages of cultural shock. "Culture shock is defined as a psychological disorientation that most people experience when living in a culture markedly different from one's own" [1].

Cultural shock consists of four distinct stages or phases [2]. The Honeymoon, negotiation/frustration, adjustment/understanding, and finally mastery/acclimation. As in any medical conditions, listed symptoms are expressed differently, with no fixed duration or symptoms assigned to any specific phase/stage. Cultural shock affects each person differently.

One of the questions I presented to my colleagues during this study was to describe any significant cultural differences that they may have observed between their home/resident country and

Poznan, upon arrival. I further ask them to describe their experiences chronologically throughout their four years of study and to include in their own words, how their previous experiences or background helped or hurt in their adjustment process. The participants (Graduating Class of 2011) consisted of people from different cultural orientation.

I was born and raised in Ghana; where I attended high school before leaving to pursue my college education in the United States, where I have lived for the past eighteen years before coming to Poznan. I believe that, every experience in life prepares us to better handle/deal with the next encounter more efficiently with minimal stress and frustration than we initially showed in our first experiences/encounter.

I experienced all the phases/stages of cultural shock when I initially migrated from Ghana to the United States. I was extremely vulnerable to all the different effect of the shock. I was young, didn't know what to expect, and combined with the vast cultural differences between Ghana and the USA at the time. I was under the illusion that the initial period of euphoria and excitement I felt was permanent. I discovered that the real "shock" is in the second stage (Negotiation/frustration phase). This is the stage where most of the symptoms of the so-called "cultural shock" are experienced. Symptoms such as; Feelings of anxiety, anger, homesickness, boredom, withdrawal, excessive sleep, compulsive eating/drinking, irritability, stereotyping host nationals, hostility towards host nationals, among others [3].

I basically experienced most of these symptoms if not all, in the United States. Through this experience, I learned that, the key to surviving or adjusting to any form of culture or environment that is typically different from that of yours is nothing less than just knowledge of the different phases/stages of the so-called cultural shock. This little, but pertinent knowledge enormously reduces any anxiety associated with these symptoms because you will know and expect these symptom, and most importantly, that they present only temporarily as a phase and will eventually and surely pass.

My experiences/study in Poznan, has presented me with unique opportunities in more ways than I could have imagined. I arrived in Poznan for the first time a couple of days before the orientation of the new students of PUMS. The excitement of finally embarking on the quest to finally obtaining my lifelong dream of becoming a physician was the only thing on my mind throughout the entire long trip to Poznan. I had my first reality check during my taxi ride from the airport. The driver didn't speak or understand English and I obviously knew nothing ('nic') in Polish as well.

This was in fact the first time I had been in a situation where I couldn't communicate verbally with anyone and without any possibility of translation for both of us. This was one of the few areas I didn't have to deal with when I migrated to the USA, because the national language in Ghana is English. I immediately found myself worrying about all the possible obstacles that come with the inability to communicate verbally; affects simple daily activities that we often take for granted. I began to question my decision; I wondered if, I should have spent as much time into researching about the Polish culture and the language as I did researching about the Medical Program itself.

By the next day, My "honeymoon" stage/phase of the cultural shock reignited and I had completely forgotten about the language barrier that I was so worried about during the taxi ride from the airport because I was now in the midst of students mostly from the English program. I was excited and ready to take on the challenges of living in Poznan. In fact, I was eager and couldn't wait to start learning the Polish language.

I may have skipped or spent very little time in the negotiation/frustration phase for a combination of reasons. I prolonged my honeymoon stage by consciously trying to spin any unaccepted (symptom) I encountered into a positive light. My knowledge and expectation of the adjusting process to a different culture, due to my previous experiences, combined with the academic demands/workload of the first semester left no time to ponder about my surrounding.

I few interesting observations that fascinated me throughout my stay here in Poznan were; Polish celebration of a name day ('imieniny') of which my name day (Michael/Michał), is celebrated on September 29, which immediately proceeds my actual birthday in August. I will definitely continue to celebrate both occasions even after I leave Poznan. Time of eating meals and the number of meals scheduled each day are much different here in Poznan, compared to the USA. Breakfast ('śniadanie') is eaten early in the morning, and then there is a two-course dinner around 4 pm ('obiad') and finally, supper ('kolacja') between 7-8 pm. Poland is a very religious country and most places are closed on Sundays. I still don't understand what difference it makes or why students usually wear formal clothes during university exams. A sign of respect I was once told, but, in my opinion, being better prepared and doing well on the exam, shows more respect to the professor and his efforts /time spent teaching students. I still joined in by also wearing formal clothing for exams during my first year of studies.

Reverse Culture Shock or "Re-entry Shock" or "own culture shock" is the manifestation of some similar symptoms of cultural shock upon returning to one's home culture after growing

accustomed to a new one [4]. I have experienced some of these reverse cultural shock symptoms first hand during most of my visits back to Ghana. To a milder degree, I find myself missing certain aspects of my experience in Poznan when I go back to the USA as well. I missed the quietness on Sundays and unconsciously assumed that most places were closed. The "Re-entry Shock" results from the psychosomatic and psychological consequences of the readjustment process to the primary culture [5]. The affected person often finds this more surprising and difficult to deal with than the original culture shock.

I will surely miss the attention from kids, who will say hello (cześć) with genuine smiles and excitement of seeing a person with an African heritage, often times; these young ones know how to say simple greetings in English, or a simply just said 'dzień dobry' with a transparently positive energy. These encounters always made me homesick, because I have thought my kids how to say these basic greetings in Polish.

By the end of my first semester, I had adjusted completely, and was enjoying the last and final acclimation stage. Besides the mastery of the Polish language (which is a really difficult language with many rules and endings) I was relatively comfortable and relaxed in my newly acquainted Polish society. I still felt like a foreigner but a welcomed foreigner. Poznan has been a home for four years of my most important academic life. We sometimes laugh about things that frustrated some of us at earlier stages of cultural shock.

Through this experience, I have had the opportunity to make friends around the world, to somewhat travel (not as much as I would have loved to), to know a little bit of the Polish culture first-hand, and to learn more about myself. I have developed additional skills as well as experiences that a classroom setting can never provide. I have also been afforded an amazing opportunity to discover new strengths and abilities, conquered and learned from many new challenges, and solved new problems as they came. Cultural differences are more than just differences in language, food, appearances, and personal habits.

Instead of trying to paraphrase the responses to my survey, I am posting the actual responses below. The participant represents just a percentage of the diversity of my colleagues, proud recent graduated physicians (Class of 2011). I have had the privilege of spending four amazing years with these participants, as we pursued our life-long dream of becoming physicians. We have learnt a lot from the Polish community as well as from each other.

I am truly proud to present their responses and experiences from their personal perspective. Again, every experience, good or bad, is to be learned from.

*“If you will call your troubles experiences, and remember that every experience develops some latent force within you, you will grow vigorous and happy, however adverse your circumstances may seem to be.”*

*John Heywood*

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The survey was carried out using both a verbal interviews as well as electronic versions of a questionnaire. These questionnaires were completed by randomly selected members of the Class of 2011. Participants reported different views or perceptions of the same Polish culture. These differences could be attributed to their cultural orientation and previous experience, which played a significant role in how, when, or whether or not they even experience any of the different stages/phases of cultural shock.

Furthermore, each student (now doctors) gave account of how they adjusted to their new environment, specifying if their previous experience/background played any role in this process. In addition, I posed questions such as, perception of general health status and possible environmental/cultural influence on social or health-related decisions or choices if any. Participants further discussed any changes to their respective coping mechanism and stress relieving techniques or activities during their study and stay in Poznan. In conclusion, each student shared their most challenging obstacle/s if any.

The electronic version was sponsored by a reputable paid electronic survey services. An email was sent individually to each participant, with a link to electronically access the questions to the survey [6].

The questionnaire was anonymous and confidential. The questionnaire addressed the following questions:

- Please describe your background. Place of birth, where you grew up as well as any where you may have lived for more than one year.
- Please describe any significant cultural differences you may have observed between your home/resident country and Poznan?
- Please describe your detailed experiences (chronologically) during your study in Poznan....starting from your arrival at Ławica Airport until now. Please include any specific positives or negatives, as well as any interesting unique stories?
- How did you adjust to your new environment upon arriving to Poznan four years ago? How long would you say it took you to adjust, did your previous background play any role in the

length of time it took you to adjust? If it did, please specify.

- Did the environment or culture influence any social or health decisions...e.g. any changes you have made in the past four years in an attempt to improve your health and well being? Did the society/ environment, in contrast, play a role in acquiring a habit that has caused a decline in your health status? Please explain in detail.
- How did you cope with stress before PUMS? Please specify any significant influence your background played, that helped you cope with stress prior to coming to PUMS? How do you cope with stress now? Please describe any experiences or encounters that have helped you deal and cope with stress throughout your studies in Poznan?
- Please describe your most challenging obstacle/s you encountered while studying here in Poznan. List any other positives and/or negatives experiences that you may have encountered.....could these have happened anywhere or are these unique to Poznan? Please explain.

## RESULTS

**Please describe your background. Place of birth, where you grew up as well as any where you may have lived for more than one year.**

- I was born in Krakow, Poland. I lived in Krakow with my father's family until 3 years old and do not recall this period of my life. Then we moved to southern Poland to Bieszczady region to my mother's family in a rural, farm-oriented home setting in a small village, Nowosielce, and lived there until I was 9 years old. When I was 9 years old, my family received a green card in the lottery and decided to move to the United States. I have lived in Monroe, New York (rural town 1 hour outside of New York City) from 1994-2003 where I finished up elementary school, middle school, and high school. I then studied 4 years at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania to earn my Bachelor's degree in biology. Afterwards, I have come back to my homeland to study medicine in English in Poznan, Poland for 4 years, where I have currently completed my studies to earn an M.D. degree.
- My parents are from Iraq, I was born in England but lived in Iraq for 12 years. At the age of 14 I moved to Yorkshire (North East of England) to live with relatives for 3 years. Then moved to London at the age of 17 to 19. Went to University of Wales for BSc and MSc

for 4 years. Returned to London for work for 3 years before coming to Poznan.

- Born in Rzeszow, Poland. Moved to NJ when I was 8 years old and spent most of my life there. For the past 4 years I have lived in Poznan, Poland to go to medical school.
- I was born in Portland Oregon. I lived in Honolulu for 3 years, and Poznan Poland for 4.
- I was born in Fargo North Dakota and moved to California when i was 15. Went to college at Sonoma State. Graduated from Western States Chiropractic in 2000, worked in Lodi California for 5 years. Came here for Medical School.
- I am an African born and raised in Ghana, West Africa. I have also lived in United States for the past twelve years. Four years ago I moved to Poland to pursue my longest dream of becoming a doctor when I got admission into PUMS.
- I was born in Iran and moved to Sweden at the age of 4 and lived in Sweden until I was 18. After completing high school in Sweden I went to the States (California) for 4 years to obtain a bachelor degree in Molecular Science. After that I started my Medical studies in Poznan, Poland where I have spent the last 4 years of my life.
- I was born in Taiwan and had the education till university.
- I was born in Hong Kong (1984), immigrated to Montreal (Quebec, Canada) when I was nine years old (1993). Then I came to Poznan four years ago (2007).
- I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. And lived in the countryside my whole life, commuting to the city whenever I needed to. The only time I moved out was to come to Poland.
- I was born in the United States. I am first generation American of African descent. I have lived most of my life in the United States but lived in Nigeria for about 10 years. My decade spent in Nigeria spanned the years of social identity formation from childhood to mid adolescence. Subsequent to returning from Nigeria to the States, I lived in multiple cities and from the mid-west to the southwest. My background is very diverse in the sense that I have lived in so multiple cities of different countries that it is rather difficult to pinpoint my cultural identity since I have assimilated aspects of different cultures in the different regions where I have lived. However, having spent the last 15 years in the Houston, and I consider this my home and place of residence.

**Please describe any significant cultural differences you may have observed between your home/resident country and Poznan?**

- Having been born in Poland, I came to Poznan knowing what to expect, in general. However, after living in the United States for 13 years, Poland had changed in many ways since I have left and also I had never lived in a bigger city in Poland. Being older and viewing my experiences from an analytical lens and critical perspective, I am able to discern certain differences between my experiences living in Poznan and New York. These include:
- Homogeneity of the population -- In Poznan, when you walk down the street, almost everyone has the same phenotype, Caucasian with similar facial features and you can at a glance say "she/he looks Polish". Being different draws a lot of attention from the general public as I have experienced while in the constant company of some of my non-Polish looking friends from various countries such as Iran, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, or Ghana. It is up to each individual how they handle this extra attention; some ignore it, some enjoy it, and some get bothered by it.

In comparison, New York is on the other spectrum in regards to diversity of the population. There, I grew up in a cultural melting pot with students from a wide variety of so many factors such as race, ethnicity, family structure, place of birth, language, etc. This diversity breeds an attitude of tolerance of differences and an individual quickly becomes desensitized to seeing different cultures of people on the streets. Having spoken to many Polish people, I have noticed that this homogeneity also spills over into opinions about the world and life as a whole and an intangible factor of being open-minded.

In New York, you get a wide variety of opinions and outlooks on life on every corner of the street, comparable to the complete palate of colors in a rainbow, resulting in a general open-mindedness of the people. However, in Poland, it seems that majority of people think in various shades of one color, which is partially related to the fact that Poland is very predominantly a Catholic nation.

- Notion of customer service -- In New York, just like the rest of the capitalist United States, customer service is a key component of the interchange between a provider or seller of a service/product and the customer/consumer. In the USA, when a service is rendered, the paying customer has certain expectations and standards which should be met, and if they are not, there is usually an apology from the provider or some form of reimbursement, such as a discount or refund.

This ideology is different in Poland, where the notion of customer service is just beginning to exist in a small percentage of establishments and exchanges. In stores, returns of items are commonly not accepted. In restaurants, when an error is made by server taking order or delay in food delivery or any other manner, usually a "sorry" is the only thing the customer receives as a form of apology and rarely ever a tangible reimbursement such as a discount or refund, unless you argue very aggressively. Thus, Polish consumers are generally more thoughtful in their purchases of products and services, analyzing more so in the front end of the purchase about the quality or whether they actually need it, rather than the back end with the American tendencies to purchase many things people do not really need or frequent returning of purchases.

Tied to this is also the idea of credit. In the USA, almost everyone has a credit card where you are spending money that you do not have at the moment. This idea of credit and loans is generally intimidating to Polish people and therefore it is not prevalent, so the money they are spending is the money they have earned and therefore making them additionally thoughtful and strategic consumers in society.

- Doctor-patient relationships in the health care system. The interactions and expectations of doctors and patients are generally different in Poland and the United States. In the United States, as a patient, the doctor takes on the role of providing care to the patient but does not do it in a manner that seems dominating or hierarchical. There is a general feeling that although the doctor is the one equipped with medical knowledge, the two individuals exist in a parallel plane as members of a community.

In Poland, there is a big discrepancy in roles and amount of power that both the doctor and patient yield. The doctor is seen as the master and the patient is seen as a servant. The doctor interacts with the patient and speaks in a manner of giving orders regarding diagnostics, treatment, and other aspects of the care of a patient, rather than the patient having an active role in the decision-making process about his/her own health, which is more evident in the United States.

The approach to health care in both countries is different, with America having more privatization of health care and limited access for mostly paying health care policy holders, while Poland has free, national health care available to all members of the society. In Poland you see some of the problems that come with a universal national health care system such as waiting for a long time to be seen by specialists, and therefore it is a common practice that patients give bribes to doctors to get appointments faster or giving of a bribe is believed by many patients to be the gateway to "better" treatment or care by the doctor.

In the United States, this type of practice rarely exists. In teaching hospitals, during my studies, I found that the doctors are often very preoccupied about translating information to the English-speaking students, but neglect to interact with the patient very much in doing so. In United States, the teaching approach has a lot more emphasis on interacting with the patient. However, this may be a difference observed because of the language barrier.

- Image - People in Poland are generally more image conscious than people in America. Polish people tend to get more dressed up when stepping outside of the house, even for grocery shopping. American people are more laid back and do not put as much effort into personal appearance and have a more relaxed outlook about this topic in general.

Also, people in Poland tend to make better food health choices and eat less fast-food style foods and therefore the population consists mostly of people with BMI's within a normal range, while in America a large percentage of the population is obese. Hence, in America, running or exercise throughout the city or in outdoors is just a normal part of city life. In comparison, you rarely see anyone exercising on the streets of Poznan and when you do so, you are given very many strange looks since many people think that exercise belongs in the gym.

There are the unspoken social norms, such as not eating on the go when you are walking or carrying flowers in a downward position.

- Bureaucracy and efficiency of handling various matters -- In Poland, matters get handled a lot slower, with more frustrations and miscommunication than in the United States. There are a lot more people you have to see to handle any single matter. For instance, to renew my Polish passport, I had to go to various offices who were giving me different information of what I actually needed in order to apply for the new passport.

Poland also uses stamps and seals to confirm the importance of documents or to make them official, rather than giving the document itself the importance. Therefore, much time is wasted stamp hunting, especially during clinical electives during hospitals to confirm attendance. All in all, it slows down the process of getting things accomplished and in my opinion is inefficient. There could be electronic systems implemented that serve a similar purpose and function that will save both time and energy, just as exist in the United States. Dealing with similar matters in the United States is a lot easier because things are designed to be more technologically friendly and there are for instance many things, such as renewing driver's license or applying for many things, which you can do online through the internet.

- I consider UK to be my home country. Religion and culture are tightly linked here in Poznan. People are reserved until they get to know you. After which you realize Polish people are warm, friendly and hospitable. In public, people have a higher threshold for tolerating bad manners. On several occasions people have jumped queues in various situations. Older people particularly do this. I found the youth of Poznan to be relatively well-behaved and respectful to their elders compared to UK. Customer service is not very good in Poland. Trying to get a product returned/exchanged is always a challenge, but in a positive sense it makes you think twice before buying anything! Hand gestures are different here also. Raising your index finger (e.g. when asking for 1 item) can be misunderstood as you telling that person off, as if they did something bad. Instead, you should gesture a thumb up to indicate you would only like 1 item. For 2 items, Polish people would show the backs of their index and middle fingers, in the UK this is a gesture for "piss off".
- Polish people are more openly religious which is not seen in the States much. There is more respect for the elderly then in the states. For example in Poznan a child would give up their seat for an elderly on a tram but in the States it basically goes on a first come first serve basis. Life runs at a slower pace...people take time out for themselves and loved ones. Work does not completely engulf people in Poznan as it does many times in NJ. Life is more family centered in Poland...you see families out and about together..but again that goes back to taking time out for loved ones.
- The US is very non-denominational. I am not used to a mixing of the church and the state. Personal space. If you bump into someone it is not rude to not say 'excuse me'. It is also very hard to find non-polish food. Even if something says it's from another country, it's still Polish food. People in Poland are more likely to help you out with things though. Some people even go out of their way to do something nice.
- The language is the biggest cultural difference for me. Lodi is a very German city so a lot of the cultural things are similar. There are a lot less Spanish speaking people here too.
- United States is a very capitalistic country and individualism is practiced more while Poland has more of socialism and communistic practice is much more.
- Having lived in Sweden most of my life it was a pretty big difference transitioning to Poznan. Sweden is known for being very developed in every aspect. It is a country where everything

is organized and runs smoothly. People speak English, and if you want to get things done, you know you will! 1) English is not as widely spoken here as back home. 2) It's not very diverse. 3) The country is very catholic 4) There is a bigger class difference between people. You definitely will see very poor people as well very rich.

- Eating habits are different. (We usually have lunch at noon and dinner around 6. Polish salad is pickled.) Traffic less convenient. Only young people speak English.
- I will have to compare Poznan with Montreal since it is where I have lived for the longest period of time so far. In terms of population diversity, Montreal is very multi-cultural in comparison to Poznan. If you walk in the busiest area of downtown, over half of the people you cross by won't be native, will be fluent in a couple of languages and have their first language that is not English/French.

In Poznan, their main language is polish and even with the increasing number of people who are learning foreign languages, there are only few of them who are very fluent. Also, Montrealers rarely get surprised or pay exceptional attention when foreign people pass by since most of us are non-natives.

Even though it is not the case in Poznan, most polish people that I have encountered have been very friendly to foreigners and the occasional staring is just understandable. (I would probably do the same if I am walking down a street in Hong Kong/China) In addition, I think that most polish people are very concerned about their clothing. Unlike many Montrealers, whenever they're not working, they look so casual as if they just walk out of their backyard.

In Poznan, people are very respectful to their religion, culture and tradition. During my first two years, missionaries would come about every two weeks. One of my friends even told them that he's Buddhist and they would keep coming and knocking on his door... No offence to any religion and I admire their perseverance, but this has never happened before I came to Poznan.

They have very nice traditions as well, for example, dressing up for finals in order to present students' thankfulness towards their teacher. In Montreal, nobody really dresses up for finals and university students may even go to the exam room in pyjamas.

In terms of culture, I don't really have polish friends, so it's kind of hard for me to comment on that. The only thing I know is that they have five meals a day and we have three. And their working hours are pretty random. Let's take the Dean's office as an example. Most academic administration offices should be available for students before and after classes, so in general, they

are open from 8am to 5pm. But in Poznan, the office is open for a couple of hours during the day where classes are usually still going on, which I still don't quite understand why.

- Starting by the language, my vernacular is Spanish and my second language is English. We are a territory of the US so the only other culture (other than Puerto Rican) I was familiar with was North American culture. Language in itself was a big culture shock since I have never lived or visited a place where I was not even familiar with the main form of communication.

The next thing was the food. I was used to a completely different diet. I had never heard of half the dishes that are common cuisine in Poland. This was my first time for cabbage, sausages, beets and even tea! Puerto Ricans are big coffee drinkers. Tea is barely seen in stores even, so when I came here and everyone was drinking tea many times a day it strange and new to me.

Interaction between people, especially academically, between professors and students, was a bit different as well. There is a lot of reverence and formality in speech, gestures and social interactions. I am used to a more relaxed or informal interaction with people both in the social and the academic environments.

The distance that people treat you with was abnormal for me, given that I come from a very warm country, in every sense of the word. Public transportation was a plus since it barely exists in my country! Everyone uses their car to go anywhere. Lastly of course, all the holiday traditions are different from my country. It was a pleasure to get to know them and take part in some.

- The main cultural difference I have observed is a system where the average person has little or no say in the system of government both at an institutional scale and on a national scale. I guess this is to be expected considering the past communistic history of Poland. I found this to be a major contrast to my home/resident culture, where people could actually make a difference if a system was inefficient. Here I felt just like number whose opinions do not count because I am a nobody. The natives seem to be ok with this practice for the fact that it is all they know and have always known. As a result people have devised means of evading the systems when they are unsatisfied to meet their ends.

**Please describe your detailed experiences (chronologically) during your study in Poznan....starting from your arrival at Ławica Airport until now. Please include any specific positives or negatives, as well as any interesting unique stories?**

- Coming to Poznan, I did not have a cultural shock experience, as I was returning to my

home country. I arrived at Ławica airport and had already arranged that a family friend would pick me up at the airport to bring me to the dorms. I lived in the dorms for my first year of studies.

It took a while to get used to how things work in Poland, in the sense of buying a cell phone, figuring out the SIM card system, buying credit. Setting up a bank account required many confirmations and verification process, which is a tendency in Poland to make things complicated and convoluted to handle such matters. However, the overall settling in experience was a smooth one with no real complications.

I speak Polish fluently, but have an American accent when I speak which is often picked up very quickly by others and I have found that sometimes people try to take advantage of this when it comes to bartering or paying for a taxi. So I have to make sure I am vigilant and observant so that I am not cheated, since it is commonly believed by Polish people that foreigners or people living abroad have a lot of money. Being firm and direct in the way you speak is usually enough to ensure a fair exchange.

In my 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> year I moved into an apartment with roommates. When moving in, we had to negotiate the conditions of the apartment and the services which are paid for and not. Throughout my experience of living in this apartment for three years and dealing with the landlord, we have learned that the landlord and tenant dealings vary from Poland to the United States and Canada.

For instance, when a fridge which was provided with the apartment was out of order for technical reasons, the landlord insisted that nothing be done about it and if we wanted to buy a new refrigerator, we could do it at our own expense. In United States or Canada, this situation would be looked at in such a way that the landlord would be responsible for fixing the broken refrigerator since it is considered a part of the apartment's property. At the end of the day, after much arguing and persuasion, the landlord agreed to pay for the fixing of the apartment. This goes to show that although rules vary in Poland and other countries in many ways, often times the people in Poland will try to get the most out of the situation and dealings with foreigners or people who live abroad, unless those individuals make a stand and speak up.

The transition of moving to Poland was made much easier and smooth by the technology available to us today. Almost every student these days owns a laptop or computer and the existence of cheap or free communication methods such as Skype, Voipstunt, Facebook, Gmail and various social networking sites and messaging programs make it easier to keep in touch with family and friends back home. This makes the homesick factor

a lot smaller and you feel less isolated in a new environment.

- I arrived in Poznan during early August 2007. My brother, who was a student here already, came to greet me and took me to the dorms. My room was not ready and I had to change it 3 times until they made me share with someone. I spent my time exploring the city, even by myself sometimes. I even went out to the club by myself once when I was approached by several curious people whom I kept in touch with for a while. They wanted to show me some of the nice places in and around Poznan which tourists don't get to see.

My experiences here have been mostly positive ones. Despite my darker skin complexion, I did not experience any racial comments. Although, whenever we had female company, some men would target the women with us, calling them things like "whores", "traitors" and so on. I thought the night life is a lot more enjoyable than back in the UK, where pubs close at 11 pm and clubs shut by 2 am. Places are open much later, and there a wider variety of cafes, clubs and restaurants. For example, there is a printing shop open 24 hrs.

- Since I spent 8 years in Poland as a child and grew up in a Polish home, I did not have much trouble when first arriving in Poznan. I think knowing the language helped a lot in the transition. One thing that I did need to get used to is the proper language that is used in Poland. When talking to an older person, even if not by much, it is impolite to refer to them as you...instead you have to use Mr. or Ms. Some people take offense if you talk to them like they are your buddy. You don't see this in the States...even among Polish people in the States the proper language is not much stressed.
- I flew into Berlin and took a train into Poznan. At that time it was much cheaper to fly into Germany. I met someone on the train that called a taxi for me so I wouldn't get ripped off by one at the train station. I arrived at my dorm and met my roommate. She was my roommate for about 2 months before I moved in with 3 Polish girls upstairs. They were great roommates, and I liked living in the Polish dorm. I liked the mix. I made several friends that year, but I am not friends with several of them now. I grew closer to people in the past 2 years that I didn't hang out with the first 2.

The next year I roomed with someone from the class behind mine. I lived with her for about 5 months, before a huge fight ended with me moving out. The apartment I got then is the apartment I live in now. Second year was very hard and I felt like I was the only person having problems, but I later realized that everyone was having a hard time. I still ended with good grades.

Third year was great, I enjoyed finally being in the hospital. I learn better on my feet. Surgery was the best for me. I also felt like the doctors give you extra instruction if it is clear you are interested. I was in several different groups because they kept switching mine around. I loved most of my group members and found something interesting about almost every subject.

Fourth years started out strange due to some misunderstanding, but things were cleared up quickly. However it turned out to be a stressful year. Some people I thought were friends turned out not to be. But I managed to power through my classes and landed some interesting electives.

I decided I do not want to train in the US, so all of my electives were international. Argentina, Poland, and Sweden.

I've always felt like I got a very good education here and was even allowed to learn some things that are above my training. I had several techniques to keep my sanity. 1) I got my own place. 2) I made Berlin my escape city when I needed to get away. 3) I tried to look at what this place could offer me that other places couldn't.

- When I arrived at the airport things seemed pretty normal. My first contact with polish people was the cab driver who charged me 55 zloty to get to the Hotel Polonez, which is normally a 20z ride. I lived there for 2 weeks then the receptionist set me up with a real estate agent friend of hers that found me a great apartment on Polwiejska. I lived there for 2 years then I moved to a great little apartment on Piekary. I gave up my place when I went back to states for rotations. Decided to stay in Karolek dorm for the last few months of school to save money. I have had all positive experiences since I have been here. Been lucky to find lots of English speaking people that helped me with things like setting up internet, bank accounts and such.
- As I arrived at the Ławica Airport I was more excited than ever that I was about to make my dream come true and pursue my ambition as a medical doctor. And then I exited the luggage area into the main airport, where it hit me, I have no idea where I am. Who are polish people? I never took the time to research who they were nor their history, nor their level of tolerance to the rest of the world.

I am a black African in an eastern European country with a culture that I had no idea of. I panicked! The polish people were not smiley like the Americans and I stood out like a sore thumb. After I made it to my dormitory, I stayed in my room most of the time and I interacted less with people. I wondered if I made the wrong decision.

I searched online if there were native blacks or any black communities in Poland but

nothing like that exist. People stared at me on the streets and I was not sure if that was a good thing. My initial life in Poznan was class to my dorm to the grocery store to my dorm again. After about three months of same routine boredom sets in. The idea to discontinue this ambition crossed my mind few times. I decided to find a different approach to survive in this "strange" land.

I visited the clubs with other students to help me understand the culture and to find a place amongst this new culture. I loved it! They loved me and accepted me; they are the sweetest people you could ever know but not from afar. You have to get close to a polish person and say 'dzien dobry' and see the wonders of niceness.

- Came to Poznan on my own. Took a cab and paid 30 zl to get to the dorms. (A ride that normally costs 11 zl). I asked the cabby how much it would cost thinking that I'm getting an honest answer and I was told 30. Coming from Sweden that was still cheap so I paid it with a smile on my face. I moved into the dorms with a roommate from Canada who was in the 6 year program. She was nowhere interested in studying and spent most of her days and night talking to her boyfriend on the phone. I had a hard time sleeping at night because of that. She decided to drop out and I was left with a single room.

First year of medical school was challenging. We had classes from early morning until late and there was not much time for studying after. I did not have many friends in the beginning because I simply did not find interest in anyone. I kept daydreaming about California, the ocean, the sun, and my friends back there.

Half way through the first year I started looking up schools I could transfer to. I started calling England, Australia and wanted to leave at any cost. I was more or less miserable until I met the sister I never had. It just so happened that me and this girl were in the same groups and sat next to each other in Histology because of our last names. We didn't talk for the longest time, however slowly we started exchanging words. We became very close friends pretty quickly and my thought about transferring slowly faded. Second year of medical school, I moved into a lovely apartment with her and another girl. Since then I have had a great time here in Poznan.

The three of us created a cozy home together and spent many days and night talking, cooking and laughing. Med school was much more enjoyable that way. We adopted a cat and took care of him and he became our little buddy. We simply had our own little family here in Poznan.

After second year, I spent the summer in Poznan by myself studying for USMLE step 1. My two roommates went back to their respective countries to do the same. That summer was

incredibly long and lonely. Had it not been for our cat I wouldn't have known what to do.

Third year came along and the three of us were back together again. It was a nice year and we had a lot of fun. Did a lot of traveling that year. Went to Paris, Rome, London and Sweden. The summer between third and fourth year I spent in Poznan studying for USMLE step 2. After that we went for our electives where I went to Canada with my boyfriend for 2 months and then to Chicago for a month. It was a great experience.

After coming back from our electives we realized that medical school is almost over and tried to make the best out of the remaining time. Some of my good memories are from our apartment. The little parties and events that we had at our place were very enjoyable. We had the opportunity to host many people at our big apartment.

The cat was also a really sweet addition to our place. We found him homeless and beat up on the street. He couldn't walk or open his eyes. We decided to take him in, feed him, take him to the vet and finally get him back to life. Our first decision was to give him away but after taking care of him for a while we realized that it would be much harder than expected. We decided to keep him. He has been the nicest cat I have ever seen. He would follow us everywhere we would go and eat when we ate. This cat reminds me of one of the messages from the book, the Alchemist by Paulo Coelho.

In that book you learn that life sometimes gives you little signs and it is up to you to take it in or not. It's up to you to open yourself up to them. And when/if you do, they can have a huge impact on your life. This cat added so much joy and kindness to our lives and there is no way I'm giving him up.

- Positive: weather is comfortable. Life style is slower than the big city. We got a lot of friends here and went through some difficult time together. Negative: When we arrived in Poznan, we felt uncomfortable walking on the street, because polish people stared at us like they had never seen Asians before. Sometimes, young kids on the street made fun of us when we walked by. We didn't feel respectful. The situation is getting better but it still sometimes happens as compared with other European countries, it rarely happens.
- Well, I have to say that I am pretty lucky because my boyfriend has already spent a year in Poznan before I came here. So there weren't really any problems or obstacles for me that are worth mentioning. I had a typical student life and like many others, I would spend some time home during Christmas holidays and summer vacations, or go visit other nearby European countries during shorter breaks. I can't really think of any specific +/-, I guess it's just easy in general for

me to adapt to different people/things/places since I have done this once already when I was nine!

- When I got to Poland I came by train through Germany. I was lucky to have had a Buddy from the class that was ahead of us because she came to pick me up at the train station. If it wasn't for that I think I would have cried. I was very scared. It was the first time away from home and my family and I didn't know where I was and had no means of communication and could not read the signs. She picked me up and ordered a cab and took me to my dorm room. It was great of her.

Grocery shopping was the next thing to get used to since I didn't know any of the products and could not read labels. It took me some time to figure out what things were. Living in the dorms in a country where you don't speak the language isolates you and makes you rely on a very small and closed community.

A lot of friendships happen but lots of dramas develop in the long run as well. This living situation was a first for me as well. However, when I got my own apartment I had a very easy time making things work with my landlords. I had nothing but good things to say about the people I rented from. It was a great experience to rent in Poznan, even with the language barrier and all.

Overall, studying and classes went well. Never had problems with professors, except for once, I addressed my professor by his last name but didn't say "doctor" or Professor" before his name, and he got mad and offended. Apparently it is disrespectful to not address the title as well as the last name of a doctor or professor. I didn't know that and felt pretty bad about it. But other than that one incident, everything has worked out smoothly.

- My arrival in Poland was plagued by uncertainty. Not knowing what to expect left me vulnerable to all things Poland had to offer, bad, good and everything in between. My first experience upon arrival, I was impressed by the Taxi cab driver who knew that I was a prime candidate for fraudulent cab drivers. He gave me pointers on how to identify and avoid such drivers. When I over tipped him because I did not know the value of the Polish currency, he returned my tip and took 2 zł. I was very impressed by this, and it gave me a sense that overall the Poles were honest people.

Upon subsequent cab rides however, I have been defrauded several times in so many ways that has made me realize that overall the quest to survive and stay afloat is a running theme in Poland, even at the cost of fraud. I even recall a cab driver charging 10zł for my luggage item that was in his trunk, in addition to the cab fare which was made up. I slowly eased into the Polish system

however staying close to American Colleagues who had been here before me, and learning the culture and people.

My first year in Poznan was a year focused on academic achievement. I was not used to the system, the language and everything was new to me. My goal was to learn as much as I could to survive but stay close to my purpose of coming to Poland, succeed and return to the States. I did not venture far from my academic endeavors, aside from the occasional social events with friends and colleagues. I also found during the first year that Poznan being a student town was a great location for socialization. So by the end of my first year I was more open to social events than I expected.

My second year would turn out to be a year of refocusing my efforts on my academics. Perhaps it was the workload that forced this, but I socialized minimally and studied maximally to stay on top of my studies.

My third year was a year of socialization. I had lived here for 2 years and the realization that this chapter would soon come to a close, it dawned on me that I had spent the past 2 years minimally socializing. This was my catch up year. I had one goal, to experience what it was to be part of the Polish society. I lived with a Polish family and took part in most of the events that defined living in Poznan, Social gatherings, parties and hangovers.

My 4<sup>th</sup> year has been a quick short year of resolution. I no longer feel like a stranger to this culture. It now feels like part of me. I can't imagine living in a different place and appreciate every experience I have acquired from Poland. I know now that once I came to understand what to expect out of the culture, life is quite pleasurable here in Poznan.

**How did you adjust to your new environment upon arriving to Poznan four years ago? How long would you say it took you to adjust, did your previous background play any role in the length of time it took you to adjust? If it did, please specify.**

- I adjusted to my new environment in Poznan almost instantaneously, since I was born in Poland and am very accustomed to the Polish culture. I had to heighten my level of patience because of the increased frustrations in getting things done efficiently in administrative matters, but that is the major change that I could remember. I had already lived on my own prior to my move to Poland, so the experience of living on my own was not new to me.

I think the fact that I was born in Poland absolutely had an influence on my very quick adjustment to Poznan, which is one of the reasons why I chose Poland as a destination to study

abroad. This way, I was able to settle down and quickly focus on my studies in the beginning of the first year.

- Whenever I move to a new place, I like to get there as early as possible. I came to Poznan about 3 weeks before the start of our studies, this gave me plenty of time to adjust, know my local environment, meet new people and feel settled in. Being from the UK, where there are over 2 million Polish people as well other many other ethnic backgrounds, for sure prepared me to be open minded and even motivated to explore other cultures. Had not already been exposed to the European culture, I think it would have taken me longer to adjust.
- It didn't take long for me to adjust completely to Poznan. I would say couple of months...up to 6months. I think the biggest thing that I had to get used to was using the public transportation (buses, trams). In the states it was almost unheard of taking a bus somewhere...everyone had a car and all you have to do is jump in and go. Not having that luxury took some adjustment but I got used to it and now enjoy walking everywhere...it's a great form of exercise => Again being born in Poland and knowing the language helped tremendously in the adjustment because if I had the language barrier, I think it would take a lot longer to adjust.
- I'm not sure if I adjusted, or if I just accepted. I never got used to the food, but lucky for me, they changed it over the past 4 years. I think it took about 6 months for things to stop seeming so foreign to me. My family and I traveled a lot, so other cultures aren't new for me.
- The hardest thing for me to adjust to was not having my own car and also the size of my apartments, still haven't adjusted to that. Other than that things were pretty easy for me to adjust to.
- Adjusting to this new environment was a gradual process. It took time, say about six to eight months for me to adjust mostly because of my own fears. The fear of being different physically and culturally. The fear of rejection and possible emotional damage as a consequence. Adjusting to Poland for me was a conscious decision, a conscious effort. Because the Polish are not smiley and sweet from afar, one has to sometimes just give themselves a chance to integrate. However the results are amazing and worth every effort.

Being in the U.S and used to everyone being proactive and very interactive was a disadvantage to being in Poland. The culture is opposite. People are not so forward and interactive. The customer service is nothing near what you get in the U.S.

Things get done when they get done. Adjusting to the new environment means learning to calm oneself down and doing things at the rate of the country. Because the frustration can be overwhelming.

- It took me about a year to adjust. In the beginning I wanted to transfer from this school to go to another country. However, after getting to know some of my classmates better I started to like it more and more. I would say it took me longer to adjust than I expected as I am a very adaptable person. The reason for that I think was because I recently had finished my studies in California and upon my arrival in Poland I kept comparing the two environments. It was hard to go from a sunny atmosphere in California to a gray Poland where I didn't know anyone and didn't speak the national language. When I moved to California it took me about 2 weeks to become comfortable and I never wanted to leave. In comparison it took me a long time to adjust to Poznan.
- I don't know how to answer this, but I think it took one year for me to get used to the life here. We learned how to cook and found that we could buy the Asian sauce and food from Berlin. Overcoming the problem of eating is a big step for adjustment.
- I'd say a week for the jet lag and a day or two for the new environment. As I have mentioned before, I have immigrated from an Asian country to an American one, so doing it once again from American to European is just simpler. And I am not a person who has high expectations, so as long as I have food, and have a place to stay (with a computer), I'm OK!
- I think it helped to have company. That would be the only upside from living in the dorms. I had someone to talk to and do things with. That helped to ease the transition. I would say it took me a long time to adjust. Maybe a whole year. There were a lot of "firsts" for me in this trip to get used to and my background didn't help at all (living at home with parents my whole life, never exposed to being independent, to speaking other languages or to fending for myself.) It has been an interesting, intense but gratifying experience.
- Adjusting to the environment no doubt was easier because I lived in the dorms in my first year, and surrounded by American Students most of the time. The effect of this minimized any obvious cultural differences that may have jumped out at me. However, my diverse upbringing having lived a nomadic life both in Nigeria and the United States had also prepared me for changes in cultural settings. I think this played a major role in shortening the

amount of time it took for me to adjust. For instance living in a City where I was not used to the luxury of having a car and having to walk most places was similar to my life in Nigeria.

How did you perceive your general health before PUMS (Medical School) How do you perceive your general health now? What did/do you do or planning to do, in order to improve your general health status....exercise, changes in eating habits, drinking, smoking, etc.

- My general health before PUMS was very good and I would still perceive it as very good now. However, before medical school, I generally exercised more often than during my studies in Poznan. The studies at PUMS have been very hectic and the schedule was busy, therefore you needed to make a concerted effort to fit exercise into your routine. Either from laziness or tiredness, I was unable to do this many times. In the future I plan to improve this area of my health by exercising regularly, especially when the weather gets nicer and a run outside is possible, rather than having to pay for a gym membership.

In regards to eating habits, before PUMS, during my undergraduate studies, I often ate food from school cafeteria and to-go places. In Poznan, I cook my own meals with my roommates almost every day and therefore monitor more closely exactly what ingredients go into the food I eat. Hence, I would consider myself a healthier and smarter eater now.

I would say I drink the same amount of alcohol now at PUMS than I did prior, which is mostly for social occasions and events. I consume mostly vodka in form of cocktails or beers, averaging about 5 drinks per night over a course of 5-6 hours, with occasions of drinking more or less. Although many people in Europe smoke and I could see non-smokers picking up the habit for this reason, I have managed to avoid picking up this new habit. In general, I have tried to maintain a balanced and a lifestyle with limited stress.

- My health was excellent before coming to Poznan. I tried to maintain a routine of exercising and eating healthy but that became increasingly difficult due to time constraints. I drank more alcohol here on occasions, it is cheaper and shots are larger than back in UK (40 ml here vs. 25 ml shots in UK). I had quit smoking many years ago and did not smoke despite the culture here where many smoke. I do go to smoke shisha about once every 2 months.
- Before PUMS I perceived my general health to be average. I didn't smoke or drink. My health now I think is a little better than when I

first came to PUMS because I eat a bit healthier now and I walk more as a form of exercise. Ideally I plan on exercising more and eating a healthy balanced diet.

- I gained weight since I moved here. I'm not sure if I was in better or worse health. I've had some health problems here, but I have very recently gotten a major one fixed. I hope I will get better then. I want to exercise more. Eating healthy is difficult here, and where ever I end up, it will be easier to watch what I eat.
- My general health before I got here was much better. It is very hard to keep up an exercise routine with classes and other activities we need to attend to. Plus I eat out a lot more here because cooking in the dorms is a pain. The school gym is great but the times available to work out are very hard to make. I have started to exercise much more since I live in 'Karolek' though. I don't smoke. I snack more now which I never did before. I drink a bit more than before, simply because I can and have more opportunity.
- My general health to me was not good at the time of being in the U.S. The 'Poles' are very relaxed and do not rush to do anything with stress. They walk a lot and eat less. They entertained themselves very well as well. Bottom line they were just plain healthy. I wanted same thing so I watched what I ate and I exercised more.
- My general health has not changed since I came to Poland. I wouldn't say I would like to change anything either. Before I came here I would eat healthy and exercise. I would say my outlook on life is similar still.
- It's healthier than before. Went to the gym regularly because the gym is close to where I live. Eating habits has changed (most of time we cook by ourselves at home)
- I was very healthy before PUMS and I am still healthy now, just not as healthy as before. I tried to improve by running and cooking myself instead of having delivery food all the time.
- I was healthy before and now as well. However, these last 2 years I have been more sedentary than ever due to the fact that I have been studying nonstop for boards and have not had much time to exercise. I think I have grown a bit lazier during the past 2 years and my health and physical condition have deteriorated since.
- The culture influenced my social habits and health habits as well. I walk a lot more, which is good for my heart and health in general. However, I drink a lot more than I have in my life, however not so much habitually as it is binge drinking. This may not be very good

ultimately for my health, but I feel like I have that under control. Or do I?

**Did the environment or culture influence any social or health decisions.....e.g. any changes you have made in the past four years in an attempt to improve your health and well being? Did the society/environment, in contrast, play a role in acquiring a habit that has caused a decline in your health status? Please explain in detail.**

- I cannot say that the environment or cultural influence made any significant influence on any social or health decisions I have made.
- In the UK it is socially acceptable and respected for people to run outside in public any time of day even after dark. Here, I am not alone in feeling that running is frowned-upon in built up areas, esp. by older people. In contrast, when I go running around Lake Rusalka, it is customary for runners to wave to each other. I find this to be a warm and encouraging gesture which I never experienced back in the UK. Other than that, I do not feel that the environment/culture had any effect on my well being. I exercise when I have time and eat what I think is healthy. The only thing I can think of is, there is a lack of outdoor sporting facilities e.g. 5-a-side football pitches and tournaments, which is something I enjoyed doing back home.
- Being in an environment where you need to walk a lot ...it has definitely improved my health...otherwise I probably would not get any exercise at all. Also having to cook for myself has allowed me to make healthier choices on foods I buy. Being in Poland has exposed me to drinking more than I normally would in the states. But I did not pick up any bad habits while here that would decline my health status.
- As I have stated a lot, the food. There are not a lot of options here for food. Most has a lot of fat in it. Some things I took for granted back home, I have to really hunt for here.
- Yeah I think that just being in college again influences your social decisions, at least to party more. I think that decline in health status occurs whenever anyone goes to college for 4 years.. just the nature of the beast. We eat crappy cause its fast, we don't have time to exercise regularly due to studying.
- But I partied as well and in the process drank and smoke which I did not do before PUMS. But in total I feel and look much healthier than I have ever been.

- Exercising and going to the gym is very important in Poland. However I already was exposed to such influence from Sweden.
- Nothing comes to mind.
- No because I am rarely in contact with the Polish society/culture, so it doesn't affect my lifestyle/health at all.
- Nothing of the sort for me.
- My general health before PUMS was good. I had no health issues. My general health now remains good. I feel a little more fit from walking most places that I've had to go. This was more exercise than I usually do at home. My eating habits however changed for the worse. I eat a lot less frequent meals than I am used to back home. Mainly due to a lack of time to cook for myself.

**How did you cope with stress before PUMS? Please specify any significant influence your background played, that helped you cope with stress prior to coming to PUMS? How do you cope with stress now? Please describe any experiences or encounters that have helped you deal and cope with stress throughout your studies in Poznan?**

- The way I coped with stress before PUMS is the same way I cope with stress now. I rely heavily on my strong support system made up of my family and close friends. If I am having a tough time, a conversation with a loved one always makes me feel more at ease and helps put into perspective my current stressor into the whole scheme of life. Occasionally I will go for a run or go to the gym to physically work the stress out which works for me. Also, I try to put my energy in something else that needs to be done simultaneously so that at the end of the day, I still get something done while suppressing my stress about the other matter.

Other de-stressing activities I enjoy are listening to music, cooking, going for a bike ride, watching a movie, reading funny stories online, and going out for a drink with a friend. I do not drink my sorrows away with many drinks and usually go out for a symbolic de-stressing beer or two. Most importantly, a tight-knit support network of friends and family gets me through any kind of stress.

- I have always dealt with stress by exercising, before and during my studies here. Even shortly before exams, I find that putting time into exercise is a worth-while investment as it rewards me with calmness and improves my concentration and ability to learn new concepts.

- My habits on coping with stress have not really changed after coming to PUMS. I still make sure that I have some time to relax (watch movie, go out with friends) and do something other than think about the situation that is stressing me at the moment. Having friends to talk to when you are stressed out is something that I really valued here at PUMS. We all were pretty much going through the same type of stress these past 4 years and having someone who could relate to you was important in my stress relief process.
- Mostly I deal with stress by trying to let out my frustrations. But I have recently become aware of how hard it is for those around me. Now I just try to deal with a situation head on, rather than letting it become stressful. I'm also going to the gym more.
- Before PUMS I coped with stress by getting outdoors, going fishing, hunting, hiking, and camping. As far as coping with stress here, I haven't really found anything, I guess parties.
- The first year of medical school curriculum included polish classes and this help to break down the language barrier. Most of the student in the four year medical program came from the U.S with polish backgrounds and so could appreciate the difficulty and challenges that the rest of us faced and so they were very helpful.
- I felt more stressed before coming to PUMS. I moved across the world from Sweden by myself at the age of 18 and had to manage to take care of myself for four years. Being in another continent so far away from your parents definitely made life more stressful. When I came to PUMS, I at least had my family closer to me. I knew that we were in the same time zone and if anything happened, I was only a 2 hour flight ride away. I learned to deal with my stress by simply realizing that being stressed does not change anything.

My friends and family also had a big influence in this matter. When you have friends to share the stress of medical school with it becomes much easier. I used to walk into every test being nervous, however these days I have learned to relax and laugh it off instead. I can remember one experience that taught me to relax. I was so nervous about taking my physics final exam during college because I always feared the subject. I missed the final test because I thought it was on another day. Hence I failed the exam and had to repeat the course. I was devastated and didn't know how to explain a fail on my transcript to my parents. I thought it was the end of my career. When I told my mother she started laughing at me and said we should celebrate this moment. We should celebrate this moment because this will be the last time I will miss going

to a test. She calm me down so much and I started laughing with her. I scored A's in all my 3 physics classes after that.

- Exercise, shopping, and hang out with friend
- I cope with stress by going out because my stress is mostly familiar before I came to PUMS. And now, I would play World of War craft or take a small trip.
- I love to read books (non medical) for pleasure and to keep my mind off things. I also like to go out with friends and chat. My habits have not changed since I came here.
- I cope with stress now much the same way I have always coped with stress all my life. Through social interactions with friends and colleagues, I minimize stress. I like to take nature walks and listen to music in the solace of my room. I find this extremely relaxing. This has always been my main mode of stress relief and much still remains my main method of coping with stress.

• **Please describe your most challenging obstacle/s you encountered while studying here in Poznan. List any other positives and/or negatives experiences that you may have encountered....could these have happened anywhere or are these unique to Poznan? Please explain.**

- The logistical nightmare of the index was one of the biggest challenges for me, especially as a class representative whom took it upon himself to carry out this duty on behalf of colleagues. On several occasions, it felt that once the course coordinators have taken the evaluation forms back from you, they no longer have a duty of care for you. Everything from then has to be done on their time and according to their mood.

One professor would even refuse to sign more than a handful of indexes at a time regardless of urgency. Some departments held our indexes for days, even weeks. The tuition fight was another challenge, which students need not experience when they are supposed to be here to learn and progress. The above would not have happened at other institutions in my belief.

On the positives, we now have members of staff in the administration who are more open-minded and supportive of the students' needs. They listen closely and implement all justified suggestions by the student body. I think studies here in Poznan are becoming progressively fruitful with all the new changes and facilities for the benefit of the students. One persistent negative experience is when polish speaking students are asked to take history from patients and those who don't speak the language are kept in the dark and become frustrated.

- I think the biggest obstacle that I encountered while studying in Poznan is getting through all the bureaucracy and paperwork in order to get anything accomplished. (Gathering stamps especially) However, I do not think that this is unique to Poznan but is a bit different from the states.
- The language is hard to learn. Even if you know a bit, people speak fast. Sometimes it's hard to understand them.
- Language barrier is huge in the clinical years. It is hard to understand patients, or to read the files. So we don't get enough practice on that. The teachers' English skills are not that great either and it is hard to follow them.
- The most challenging experiences include language barrier, getting things done by people in government offices can be very difficult. Old and impractical rules that may have worked decades back are still in existence and so it takes extremely long time to accomplish anything. The dependence on other students to help posed challenges as well since most of them were busy and could not be available for help all the time.
- I have heard from several sources that Poznan does not have the nicest people in Poland. How true that is hard for me to confirm because I have not lived anywhere else. I believe any city/country has its positives and negatives, including Poznan.

Dealing with people on a regular basis was the most challenging aspect while studying here. In general I can say that there is a trace of negativity in people that sometimes can come off as very bitter. I am not very surprised however, since Poland was under Communist influence for so many years. Examples of this:

1. There is no customer service. This is true whether you buy something from a store and want to return in, or if you go to a restaurant and complain about the food. My recent experience was actually yesterday when I ordered a sandwich at a restaurant. The menu is in Polish and in English. The English description of the sandwich had chicken in it; however the Polish version had no chicken. I of course read the English menu (not knowing that the Polish one did not include chicken) and ordered the sandwich and I received it without chicken. After telling the waitress that they forgot to put the chicken in there she apologized. Three people, including the manager came out to us and said that the Polish menu is the one that is correct and if we want chicken we have to pay 4 PLN extra. We spent 5 minutes discussing with them how that is not our fault and the manager was arguing back. Finally they said because they are such a

great restaurant they are willing to make this sacrifice this time.

2. Nothing is official unless there is a stamp/seal on it. Coming from a country where everything is computerized it was very hard to accept this. Many times you have to go from one office to the other, collect a signature and stamp, and bring it to the next office. Due to this system everything is slowed down and to get anything done it takes much longer than expected.

Positives:

1. Poznan is in a great location in Poland. It allows you to travel to different cities/countries with relative ease. Berlin is 3 hours west and Warsaw is 3 hours east on a train. You can also fly to many other countries from here.
2. It's a modern city in comparison to many other Polish cities. A lot of international business meetings take place here.
3. It's cheaper than the other big cities in Poland. (i.e Warsaw, Krakow)

I think my stay here in Poznan would have been much harder if I did not have my close friends and boyfriend. When you are an international student here in Poland, studying in English, spending time with international students, it becomes very hard to actually experience Poland and what Poland is all about. Having friends with a Polish decent I think I came to experience a lot of the cultural aspects of Poland. For example, celebrating a Polish Christmas, Easter and understanding Catholicism.

Polish people are very hospitable and inviting when you go to their homes. I would not have experienced this had it not been for my friends with a Polish decent. I am very grateful for my experience here and for all the things I have seen.

- No comments
- I am not sure how to answer this question. If related to our school and schedule I would say the lack of involvement of the school in our academic development. We are on our own when it comes to dealing with any extracurricular situations; even if these are school related (mainly I am talking about electives and residency). If social, I cannot say I have anything to complain about. Nothing has really been challenging for me with regards to living in Poznan. Arranging for a place to live was easy enough. Transportation is accessible and affordable. So is travel. Once you learn some polish, ordering food and buying stuff (groceries or shopping) is easy enough. And as far as health and visas, getting NFZ is a pain but it is doable and it covers for your basic needs. Also private hospitals are

affordable. As far as visas it's all easily taken care of in the States so there is not much of a hassle there either.

- I cannot really say there has been any real obstacles I have encountered while studying here in Poznan. I find that in general, life is about finding that balance between challenges and acquiring the skills to overcome them. Distractions that prevent one from overcoming such challenges would be my definition of obstacles. Thus far, I have not had any real obstacles that I can identify.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is evident from the above responses that we perceived the same Polish culture differently. I saw a culturally diverse city when I arrived in Poznan because of the number of foreign students in this city. I have met and interacted with people from almost every part of the world during my studies in Poznan. I also agree with my colleagues' assertion that USA is full of people from different walks of life and Montreal presents more multicultural society compared to Poznan. Homogeneity of the Polish population, as was noted by one of my colleagues is evidently accurate, but how could I have missed noticing these differences. This may have been due to my Ghanaian background prior to moving to the US. Ghanaian population also being comparatively is totally homogeneous.

Excessive staring is a very common in Poznan, mainly from the natives. It goes without saying that being different in any society draws attention to you as a whole. After noticing that there were very few people of African heritage here in Poznan, I quickly understood the reason for the stare. I especially enjoyed the attention and comments from kids on the street as I mentioned earlier. This sentiment is not shared by many others, my Taiwanese colleagues perceived this experience or encounters as being teased by these kids, perhaps; it wasn't the same attention I described. But, ultimately, it is evident that, everyone is different, it is highly possible for another person of African heritage to take offense to these same comments or attention from probably the same individuals or children.

Our various backgrounds and experiences, definitely becomes a part of us, and influences how we interact or deal with things in life, especially being exposed to a new culture or environment as shown in this case. Common views such as; Poland being an openly religious country, more respect being shown to the elderly as well as the uniqueness of the Polish menu.

Adjustment time took close to one year for most people, except for the few with specific different experiences that sped up the process. Participants with previous exposures to new

cultures fit right in as soon as they got here. The only common and extremely important obstacle was the language barrier for most students without a Polish background. My Swedish colleague mentioned that she only needed about a week to get accustomed to California, but close to a year to adjust and be completely comfortable here in Poznan, even though she enjoyed the fact that her parents were in the same time zone. This may, among other reasons, be attributed to inability to speak or understand the language.

Language can be one of the most important factors in adjusting to a new environment. It was frustrating to know what exact ingredients you wanted from a grocery store, but unable to describe or ask how to find them. Some of my colleagues expressed more frustration about not finding certain food items that they needed... I guess that would have eased their anxiety and reduced some of the symptoms of cultural shock, such as feeling homesick.

The only significant changes associated to healthy habits and exercising were attributed more towards the workload of our studies rather than cultural or environmental influences. Most of us blamed the lack of exercise and eating unhealthy dishes on the busyness of our schedule. On the contrary, others reported cooking more and eating healthier since being here in Poznan. Unfortunately, smoking is an extremely common finding in Poznan, especially amongst the youth. Despite this excessive smoking in the environment/community, participants of the study didn't pick up that specific habit or return to smoking as an old habit. Binge drinking is a common practice among students at PUMS, as affirmed by one of my colleagues, this mostly occurs after a major exam.

No specific differences or changes to how each student handled stress before coming to Poznan. Overall, most of us relied on the support system (either from our respective homes or from fellow colleagues, here in Poznan) to get us through each day. As one of my colleagues and friend mentioned earlier, finding her friend (now considered a sister) when she did, was the determining factor in her attempt to transfer to a different medical program outside of Poland, during what I will assume to be the negotiation/frustrating stage of cultural shock.

It is evident from the data collected that, the rate and duration of overcoming cultural shock depend on many factors, such as each person's general personality, motivation to adapt, language skills, support, (of fellow colleagues, family, and somewhat the natives). The most significant being each individual experience/background/cultural orientation or distance between the two cultures involved. There is no valid general model on how to prepare/adjust/adapt or even overcome the

effects of cultural shock because each person reacts differently, as shown from this study.

I have learned, and I am sure my colleagues will agree with me that.....It is often a difficult, painful and extremely complex process to adapt to a different climate, different social norms and especially to different cultural values. We travelled across the ocean to Poznan to obtain our lifelong dream of becoming physicians, so for some of us, we had to endure these tough transition period and quitting to return to our respective homes was not even an option, but I must say that, coming out at the other end is rewarding, enriching and definitely worth the effort! Once I understood the Polish culture and a little bit of the famously difficult (trudny) Polish language, I added Poland to what I consider my top three home countries....Ghana, USA, and now Poland.

There are a few strategies that could help anyone who may be embarking on a similar journey, to simply help minimize, cope, adapt, or overcome the initial inevitable cultural shock they may encounter. These are strategies that my colleagues and I used, or wish we had used or at the very least been aware of, prior to or upon our initial arrival to Poznan.

The most important, as I stated earlier, is to be completely aware of the different stages of cultural shock and the signs and symptoms associated with each stage. Knowing what to expect before arriving can help enormously in how you will react to the new environment/culture or country. This can easily be accomplished through a very thorough preparation prior to the date of departure. The best way to prepare is to start by contacting alumni or senior students of the specific institution, who may have actually been through the process and inquire about any possible problems and/or disappointments they may have experienced. These contact information can be easily obtained from the school.

Additionally, if possible before arriving, or after you arrive, make a conscious effort to learn the language. It is amazing how much our brains unconsciously absorb, after making a conscious decision to learn a specific language. I didn't realize how much Polish I had absorbed until my encounter with a Polish Native in an electronic store in Maryland, USA. Even though she spoke perfect English, speaking a little Polish with her outside of Poland was priceless. I am sure she was the only one in the store who could tell how bad my Polish was, though she understood every word.

I have learned that, every individual is different and act accordingly, even within the same community/culture. Research has shown that the "human factor" plays a huge role in any cultural setting [7,8]. Avoid making comparison and generalizing, one Polish person or one foreign student, don't represent the entire group.

Communicate your thoughts and feeling as much as possible, show sympathy and understanding for beliefs or practices that may differ from yours.

Be mindful of the possible differences in your sense of humor, but have a sense of humor. What may be considered funny in one culture could even be considered offensive or simply not funny in another culture. I remember my Polish teacher telling us a joke during our one and only first semester basic introductory Polish. We only realized she had finished telling the joke when she started laughing, she then claimed that the joke would have been funny to us if she had narrated it in Polish or it was narrated in English to her Polish students who understood English. To prove her point, she asked one of us to tell an American joke in English, which I quickly volunteered. My classmates and I started and couldn't stop laughing even before I completed the joke. Pani Barbara didn't find the humor in my joke and obviously didn't laugh....could this have been attributed to the cultural differences in terms of sense of humor? Or did she hold herself back from laughing to prove her point. In any case, there are many things which can cause a person or a specific culture to weep, get angry, be annoyed, embarrassed, or discouraged, but not the other.

History plays a huge role in the development of any culture [9]. The culture of any group of people is therefore product of history, built up over a period of time. We are all largely on autopilot when it comes to culture, we act in an automatic way in getting what you want from your environment. Don't make judgments or draw any conclusion (good or bad) based on what is portrayed on TVs and in movies/cinemas, these are often poor representations of any cultural environment.

Earl Nightingale wrote that "*Our attitude toward life determines life's attitude towards us*" In this context, our attitudes towards a new environment/culture determines its attitude towards us. Be open minded, be prepared, know what to expect and be ready to endure through those phases/stages. Find your personal coping mechanism that works for you; some of my colleagues used physical activity, some travelled, and surprisingly, some even felt better and rejuvenated after crying.....whatever you can do to get through most of the symptoms of the second stage of the so-called cultural shock, just do it, they will all pass eventually.

I often tap into my faith with constant repetition of "The Serenity Prayer" , originally untitled "Prayer" by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr [10] which reads "*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference*". This unconsciously always put a huge smile on my face in whatever situation I found myself....after all, "a

smile confuses an approaching frown”- Unknown. Share your experiences and difficulties if you can, it is highly likely that other students will be going through or had gone through that same experiences/situation you may be going through or facing.

It is important for me, to address the understandable attitudes of some of the natives as well as some senior students who had been able to overcome the cultural shock without even knowing that they went through the above listed stages. Frustration, which is one of the possible symptoms of cultural shock, are sometimes misinterpreted / perceived as an aggressive attitude towards the host countrymen and/or the senior students. Generally, people unconsciously develop or are most likely to act defensively, when they sense aggression towards them.

These misguided, unnecessary, yet understandable defense mechanisms, in this case, often consisted of hostility and formulation of initial negative impression about some of us (the sufferers of cultural shock).....we are sometimes perceived as being rude and disrespectful.

This stereotyped first impression also led to us being avoided by some natives or senior students, hence, worsening our frustration, among other symptoms.

Some of the initial negative impressions created by some of my colleagues about the natives of Poznan were unknowingly derived from this unfortunate sequence of event. One of my colleagues described her initial impression the natives of Poznan as unfriendly and mean, because they weren't smiling back. This, she wrote, made her question her decision to travel across the ocean to study in Poznan and wondered if she would have survived the entire four years. She soon discovered and described the natives as one of the most amazingly friendly and cheerful group of people she had ever known, lived, or been associated with, in fact, she felt sad when it came time to depart from Poznan after completion of our medical studies.

This study showed that each individual's respective cultural background/orientation played a significant role in the length of, as well as ability to cope with the different stages of cultural shock as stated earlier in the text. It is also of paramount importance for each foreign/international student to be extremely prepared by using some of the tested strategies listed in this text, and be knowledgeable of the different stages/phases of cultural shock, prior to arriving, living and studying in a new cultural environment.

It is equally important for the natives or residence of Poznan in this case, to be aware of the existence of “cultural shock” and its variable stages as well as some of its likely symptoms. This will not only help and ease the transition process,

copied, adapting and adjusting to the shock of being in a new environment, but it will also help the natives to understand and possibly briefly tolerate some of our/foreign student's initial unacceptable, yet uncontrollable frustrating behaviors.

## CONCLUSIONS

The initial excitement of being exposed to a new cultural setting overshadows the fear of the unexpected and unknown....but may be short lived. A person's culture generally reflects very deep perceptions, beliefs, and values that influence his or her way of life and the way that he/she views the world. My colleagues and I may have viewed all our experiences differently, but, one thing none of us could deny was what we learnt during our time in Poznan, as well as the role our previous experiences played in our survival and adjustment processes. Experiences teach us, whether those experiences were positive, negative or both. As long as we learn from it, we can use that lesson to improve our lives and/or the life of others.

*“In the transmission of human culture, people always attempt to replicate, to pass on to the next generation the skills and values of the parents, but the attempt always fails because cultural transmission is geared to learning, not DNA.”*

*Gregory Bateson*

Just as we don't get to choose our parents, we have no say in whatever culture/society we are born into. We all have the capacity to learn and use what our respective cultures provide or teach us. Even though English is the national language in Ghana, I was exposed to, and hence, I understand and speak many other local dialects. I didn't decide to consciously learn to speak and understand these languages, my parents didn't teach me, nor was I enrolled in any form of official language program to learn; I was simply born/introduced/exposed to these unique specific languages/dialects as part of a whole Ghanaian cultural environment, in which I grew to love and proud consider to be a huge part of my cultural upbringing.

The amount/volume of tea I drank in Poznan in four years, was most likely more than the combine volume of tea I have ever drank in my entire life. I have progressively and unconsciously added many traditional Polish dishes to my menu/shopping list; with some of my favorite being Pierogi (boiled, baked or fried dumplings) and Golabki (stuffed Cabbage). Barszcz czerwony (bright red Polish beetroot soup), Kapuceniak (sour cabbage soup) were my favorites Polish soups. Some of my colleagues especially enjoyed the famous Bigos, Kielbasa, **Nalesniki**, and the Polish **wild Mushroom Soup**, among others.

I always looked forward to the “Fat Thursday”(the last Thursday before Ash

Wednesday during Easter) so that I can eat Pączki [11] excessively without feeling guilty about the excessive sugar load. Traditionally, the reason for making pączki was to use up all the lard, sugar, eggs and fruit in the house, because they were forbidden to be consumed due to Catholic fasting practices during Lent [12].

It is evident that we don't choose or decide which culture we are exposed to and learn from as children, but once learned; culture becomes our way of life. This becomes the culture we would have known and familiarized ourselves with, one that we confidently accept and believe to be almost ideal. A culture that creates an environment that affords us the ability to obtain or find most of our basic essential items without much effort.

Like many others, I underappreciated my Ghanaian culture until I was in the negotiation/frustration (second) stage of cultural shock when I initially moved to the United States. Most of my colleagues shared that same sentiment and really began appreciating their respective previous cultures/environments, presumably during the second stage (the most profoundly unbearable stage) of cultural shock while in Poznan.

We appreciated our cultural background not only for the automaticity it presented us to be able to easily get what we wanted, but, also, for the significant role it played in the entire process of coping and adjusting to our new culture/environment in Poznan. Everyone has their own specific way of accepting, or under what circumstance they accept their cultures. We've all understandably considered or even still consider our own cultures as the best, we often consider "our" way, as the only way of doing things.

*"I am a man of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times."* - Everett Dirksen. I believe that if God had really wanted me otherwise, He would have created me otherwise, in a different place, with different features and possibly in a different culture. I love and try to stay as committed to my cultural heritage, but I am also very flexible in my approach. Flexibility/adaptability is the ability to change oneself to fit to occurring changes or the ability to cope with unexpected disturbances/changes in the environment [13,14].

Cultural shock is mostly inevitable when one is exposed to a new cultural environment, but, with flexibility and willingness to change our preconceived mindset, we can ease the adaptation process and duration. There is a reason behind almost all the different ways of doing things in most cultural environment. The best approach to any new cultural setting is to let your curiosity guide you; be constantly willing and eager to learn and enjoy the differences between your specific culture and the new one. Avoid comparing and/or

criticizing any differences noticed. All judgmental behaviors should be avoided or kept to a bare minimum. Avoid blaming any/all unfortunate/bad things on the new environment; things that may or may not have happened to you, irrespective of where you are. Find the humor in each day and each crazy experience. The fact of the matter is, each individual is different; within the same countries, states, cities or even within the same families/households. Deal with difficult people/situation individually without generalization. Express warmth, empathy, respect, and positive regard for others without any expectations.

It is pretty simple. We simply have two choices in terms of our attitudes wherever we may find ourselves, including studying abroad. Either Positive or Negative. Even after following all the necessary steps and successfully get through the initial "shock", there will still be some inevitable tough times that accompany studying in a different country that we had to and anyone else may have to go through them. A positive attitude helps you channel your needed energy into being worry free and focused on being successful your respective course of study.

Keep in mind that a new country/culture can present with daily challenges; such as opposing views, cultural norms and even isolation and loneliness. Know yourself, know your strengths and weaknesses, know your limitations, and remain true to yourself. Acculturative stress and certain ethnic identities have been shown to cause depression with -suicide ideation [15]; knowing and being true to your self can help each individual in taking the necessary personalized steps during these transition times. Have patience and never forget that, this transition process, like all other transitions/stages/phases in life, shall also surely pass.

Irrespective of our backgrounds and orientations, we managed to stick together as much as possible and finally accomplished this long, rewarding as well as gratifying medical education to become doctors. Research has shown that, the ability to recognize, pay attention, and accommodate cultural differences, helps physicians in making a more suitable clinical decision, suggest good unique clinical management to yield the best possible outcomes [16]. I pray that we all use our experiences here in Poznan, to welcome all the different forms of nationalities, personalities, and multicultural society as we embark of the next stages of our medical careers.

*"Experience is not what happens to you. It is what you do with what happens to you."*  
Aldous Huxley

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